



English literature GCSE: a myth buster

The new GCSEs in English Literature will be broader and more challenging for pupils than those available at the moment. They will give pupils the chance to study some of this country's fantastic literary heritage, including works by Jane Austen, George Orwell, Kazuo Ishiguro and Meera Syal.

We have not banned any authors, books or genres. The exam boards have decided what literature to include, subject to the minimum requirements we set out.

GCSE specifications are only a starting point. Parents will rightly expect their children to read more than four pieces of literature over two years of studying for their GCSEs. It is important that pupils read widely, as they will in future be tested on two unseen texts which can be by authors outside of the exam board specification.

Our new secondary curriculum also explicitly sets out that children must learn about 'seminal world literature' between 11 and 14. American classics are precisely the sorts of books we would expect to be taught at this age.

Myth: American classics like *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* have been banned from English literature GCSE.

It is nonsense to say any authors, books or genres have been banned. Exam boards have the freedom to include a range of set texts in their specifications, and teachers are as free to introduce children to the brilliant writing of Lee and Steinbeck, and other US writers, as ever.

What we have given exam boards the opportunity to do is broaden - not narrow - the range of books young people study for GCSE.

Our subject content for new English literature GCSE sets out simply the minimum pupils will need to study - a Shakespeare play in full, poetry from 1789 including the romantics, a 19th-century novel, and fiction or drama from the British Isles post-1914. Beyond this, exam boards have the freedom to design specifications so that they are stretching and interesting, and include any number of other texts from which teachers can then choose.

This means pupils will study a broader and demanding range of literature than ever before. We want to expose children to works that will engage and challenge them and give them a rigorous basis in the study of literature.

Myth: The Department for Education only values British authors. Children will no longer be allowed to study books from other countries.

This couldn't be more wrong. The new subject content will rightly ensure that all pupils have a solid grounding in the rich literary heritage of the British Isles. But we also want teachers and pupils to read widely and freely, from all corners of the globe. The new subject content allows and encourages this. Pupils will be tested on an "unseen" text, which will reward those who have read widely and are able to compare and contrast a range of texts. Exam boards remain free to include a rich array of poetry, drama and prose from other literary traditions.

Myth: The Department for Education is trying to control what teenagers are allowed to read.

False – pupils at key stage 4 will be expected to read a wide range of high quality, challenging, classic literature and extended literary non-fiction. The inclusion of unseen texts in the GCSE means students will be better equipped to analyse and evaluate language than before. Far from controlling, we are giving free rein to curious and inquiring minds. By giving pupils an essential grounding in the most demanding literary works we are equipping them with precisely the skills which will build their confidence and enable them to discover new, even more challenging literature for themselves.

Myth: You don't think teenagers can cope with challenging literature.

Wrong - we have toughened up the subject content to ensure that pupils benefit from a broader and more demanding range of literature than ever before. Our new content sets out the minimum that they are expected to learn, not the maximum of which we believe they are capable. There are many brilliant schools, including Thomas Jones Primary and King Solomon Academy, both in London, which have high levels of children on free school meals - but exceptionally high standards. These schools' reading lists are challenging - and their teachers share with us the high expectations that all pupils can achieve great things.

Myth: OK, so you haven't banned any books. But you designed the new GCSEs in such a way that it was impossible for the exam boards to include US literature.

This is not correct. We consulted on the minimum requirements for the new GCSE criteria last year: the final categories (a work by Shakespeare; a selection of poetry; a 19th century novel; and a British work since 1914) are the product of that consultation. We were always clear that exam boards could add further works if they wanted – and the criteria explicitly say they can.

We would also not expect any school to think that pupils should only be reading their GCSE set books. Our new national curriculum sets out that all pupils should read a wide range of fiction and non-fiction, including “seminal world literature”, and we have made questions on unseen texts compulsory at GCSE in order to reward those who read widely.

Myth: You don't like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Of Mice and Men*, so you don't want anybody else to read them either.

Wrong. The Secretary of State has read both and believes they are great books - indeed, he believes all children should read them, if possible. There are four exam boards which can offer GCSE English literature and there are no rules either requiring them to exclude or marginalise any writer. Exam boards are free to include a range of texts on their set lists for GCSE, as long as Ofqual, the independent regulator of exams standards, rules that they meet the rigorous new content requirements which we have set out. What has been so sad in recent years has been the narrowing of GCSE reading lists - with a very small number of books read by the vast majority of children, to the exclusion of so much other wonderful literature. Our new GCSE corrects that.

Myth: Children have always had to study Shakespeare in depth.

Sadly not. People travel to England from all over the world to celebrate the works of Shakespeare, and yet the current GCSEs - which we are replacing – have allowed pupils to get good marks by focusing simply on extracts of one work by the Bard. The minimum requirements for our new GCSE means all English literature pupils will study at least one Shakespeare play in full. Additionally, our

new national curriculum also says all pupils should study two Shakespeare plays between the ages of 11 and 14.

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